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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on aspects of e-government with emphasis on how local authorities are coping with the transition into the Information Society. E-government is reviewed in the flight of such topics as a social inclusion, security and e-democracy. The challenge has been set in the United Kingdom for local authorities to deliver 100% of services capable of electronic delivery by 2005, with 25% to be delivered by 2002. The research was carried out with the support of a local authority council in South Yorkshire. It included a survey of members of Northern Authorities Benchmarking IT (NABit) to ascertain views on various aspects of e-government. The results were analyzed to provide a more valid representation of local authorities' attempts to reach the 2005 target. The findings challenge some of the views portrayed in the literature review and show low confidence in achieving government targets. E-learning emerged as a key factor to prevent social exclusion and guarantee e-democracy. (Contains 16 references.) (Author)

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Social Inclusion, Security and e-Democracy Issues in e-Government: the Role of e-Learning

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on aspects of e-government with emphasis on how local authorities are coping with the transition into the Information Society. E-government will be reviewed in the light of such topics as social inclusion, security and e-democracy. The challenge has been set in the UK, for local authorities to deliver 100% of services capable of electronic delivery by 2005, with 25% to be delivered by 2002. The research was carried out with the support of a local authority council in South Yorkshire. It included a survey of members of Northern Authorities Benchmarking IT (NABit) to ascertain views on various aspects of e-government. The results were analysed to provide a more valid representation of local authorities' attempts to reach the 2005 target. The findings challenge some of the views portrayed in the literature review and show low confidence in achieving government targets. eLearning emerged as a key factor to prevent social exclusion and guarantee e-democracy.

Introduction

The information society could be seen as *"a world where it is possible to access vast quantities of information on demand and to transact remotely"* (Lampard, 1997:180). This quote emphasizes the view that the Internet is removing distance as a factor in many transactions and conversations. Mulquin (1998) thinks that the term "information society" is misleading because people want communication more than they want information. However, despite the fact that since the advent of email the desire to communicate appears to be greater than ever, it does not necessarily follow that people want correspondence more than they want particular facts and figures. It seems that the more access to information people have, the more access they want, which increases the relevance of the term, "information society". Mulquin (1998) also uses the phrase *"the death of distance"* but this does not reflect the fact is that most people live their lives on a local scale and are therefore most likely to be interested in local activities, businesses and information.

E-Government in the UK

It is in this context of the Information Society that the UK government has stated its commitment to providing better services for the public, and it is the citizen that is at the centre of the change. Departmentalism has characterised government for a long time and e-government seeks to challenge these rigid structures. Governmental demarcations have lead to inefficiency for the customer, as well as a frustratingly slow pace for those working within the sector. This research revealed that local authorities are aware of the necessity to break down this "silo effect" in order to create more flowing information systems and practices. However, the implementation of the required change process is being hampered by existing systems, for example, a top-down organisational structure of local authorities prevents the very change that needs to take place. Nevertheless, local authorities are aware of the need for a culture change, which is the first step in actually making the changes happen.

Academic literature has embraced the ideal of e-government. Generally, the ideas about e-government are similar, i.e. that it will revolutionise the way the government transacts and interacts with businesses,

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citizens and other areas of government. In fact, it is thought that e-government will impact all aspects of an organisation, from the highest level down to the customer as an individual. However, although predictions for e-government in the UK appears to be optimistic, these initiatives are still in their infancy and it will take much longer for problems to be identified and resolved. Much of the literature at this point is somewhat theoretical and sparse, and any firm conclusions at this stage are likely to be later challenged.

Currently, Central Government stresses the need for Local Performance Indicators for Best Value. Evidence from this research would suggest that this has been taken on board, with the majority of authorities questioned using their own indicators. This is in line with the Audit Commission's recommendation mentioned in the literature review. However, if measured alongside the results from the question of whether the authorities thought that they would meet the 2002 and 2005 targets, some Local Indicators are not as effective as they might be, since the majority of authorities are not confident of achieving the 2002 target. Most authorities were confident of achieving the 2005 target though, which suggests that indicators may have been implemented too late in some authorities for them to make a big enough difference to the 2002 target. However it must also be remembered that these indicators are for guidance only and may not be as relevant to the targets as the results suggest. Evidence from the interviews conducted stresses some frustration over the changing of Best Value Performance Indicator 157, which might have caused some authorities to have to change or update their own indicators and cause delay in working towards their targets.

Electronic Service Delivery as a Form of e-Government

Overall it seems that the UK government is pushing for Electronic Service Delivery (ESD). There are already countless projects aimed at getting local authorities to bid for money to implement technological solutions. This may hide the real need for cultural change in local authorities organisations and structure in order to support and endorse ESD. Technology and cultural change have to work interdependently and even though this change process is apparently taking place, more will need to be done to change attitudes and ideas in local government.

As far as the development of e-government goes, there is certainly a good deal of progress being made, although not always at the level or speed that the government expects or claims it to be. Although the literature is very biased towards the benefits of e-government, the potential dangers are also highlighted and it is understandable that such a new form of government is seen as exciting at this stage. It will most likely be a few years down the line that mistakes and problems will be recognised. One problem that does need to be addressed is the need to train people in the new skills required in this new society so that they understand the uses of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Moving Towards E-Democracy

One of the major pillars of the Information Society, and the change process that is taking place in central and local government, is the need for consultation with the citizen. E-democracy therefore, has the potential to provide a forum for consultation processes. It is predicted that voting and voter registration will be carried out online in the next few years (DTLR, 2001), although while authorities appear to be concentrating on working towards other objectives, this could be a doubtful target at the moment. On the other hand, the advent of digital television, the opportunity to vote and ease of doing it from one's armchair, thus helping to increase public participation, might just make the 2005 target achievable. Nevertheless, it should be noted that voting is not the only cornerstone of democracy or e-democracy, but that ESD, associated with access to local and national politicians, is also imperative.

Councillors are taking tangible steps towards e-democracy, with many having email addresses so that citizens can voice their concerns/problems to a person, rather than a department. This should make the local councils more aware of people's concerns as well as making them answerable to their constituents. The literature on e-democracy highlights the need for the citizen to be part of the consultation process, but it does not seem likely that democracy will increase dramatically unless the other issues are addressed too.

However, all dreams of e-democracy may be at risk if the citizen is not prepared to make use of ESD services. The phenomenon of the non-networked citizen will tend to deepen the socio-economic divide.

Social Inclusion vs. the Digital Divide

There is a great deal of literature that confronts the ever-increasing problem of social exclusion and the threat of a "digital divide", not just concentrating on what the government is or should be doing, but its nature and possible consequences of this divide. Social exclusion can be defined as:

> *"What can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. In the past, governments have had policies that have tried to deal with each of these problems individually, but there has been little success at tackling the complicated links between them, or preventing them from arising in the first place."*
>
> Stoker, (2000)

In 1997, the UK government set up the Social Inclusion Unit, with a remit to help improve government action across departmental boundaries to combat social exclusion, thus at least addressing the issue. As one of the principles of e-government is to challenge social exclusion, the UK government's Policy Action Team (PAT15) published a report in March 2000 entitled "Closing the Digital Divide" in which it announced a £252 million initiative to increase access to the emerging technologies.

The following statement shows that the government has indeed recognised the danger of the digital divide:

> *"We cannot risk leaving behind people living in our poorest communities. We must close the digital divide so everyone can reap the benefits of living in an e-nation. Government, business and voluntary and community organisations must work more closely together to help achieve this aim."*
>
> Department for Trade and Industry (2000).

Despite the fact that the report was written over a year ago, so far there has been no evidence that any goals set out in the report have actually been achieved. The report only stated new technologies were needed to help disadvantaged groups and did not elaborate on how these ideas should be actually implemented. Thus, whether or not the government will succeed in fulfilling its promises will be only seen in 2005.

Internet Access in the UK

The government claims that Internet use is growing rapidly (DTLR, 2001), although it recognises that there is still a divide between those who do and do not have access. Symonds (2000) produced a table showing the percentage of the population with Internet access in 2000, with Britain ranking eleventh out of the 31 countries examined, behind the US, Canada and Singapore, all leaders of e-government. Furthermore, in a report by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, Duffy (2000) presents the results of a survey that show that 71% of the respondents from deprived areas had no access to CMC technology at home or work. This may sound a significant figure. However, the findings of the same Social Exclusion report indicate that Internet/email is the least attractive medium for gaining information by the majority of people living in deprived areas. This being the case, it appears that although people may indeed have access to appropriate technology, often they are simply not aware of it and do not have the appropriate skills to use it.

In support of this, Booz, Allen & Hamilton (2000) proposed that Internet penetration should be above 70% for e-government to be considered a success and to prevent the development of a digital divide. Since this figure has not yet been reached, there is clearly some way to go before Britain achieves the desired level of Internet access. Stoker (2000) considers that the lack of computer equipment will not be the major factor preventing some people from access to online services, since digital television will provide access when it replaces analogue television in 2008. Nevertheless, cost for telecommunications equipment (for example obtaining sufficient bandwidth for mobile phone users) could well hamper further growth of Internet use. Furthermore, if insufficient use of the Internet is indeed due to lack of awareness, as well as lack of skills, then the reason for educating citizens regarding the uses and benefits of ICT is immense.

Addressing the Digital Divide: Access versus Education

Symonds (2000) argues that the digital divide is **not so much a question of access but of education**. The government is addressing this, for example the National Grid for learning is intended to provide access to the Internet for all UK schools. Other initiatives such as Learndirect, focus on empowering the socially excluded to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the "e-revolution" (DTLR, 2001). The Booz, Allen & Hamilton (2000) report also stresses the need for Internet skills to be part of the national curriculum. However the community members who have left school would still not be prepared to use ESD services. Thus, adding a new component to social exclusion, based on a generation gap. It is proposed that one possibility to address this new divide would be to assign a new role to younger members of the community who would then influence and educate their elders in the benefits of ICT. Nevertheless, and in the short-term, the government has to assume responsibilities in preparing the citizen for E-government, namely through e-Learning initiatives and encouraging Lifelong-Learning.

The Case Study

The overall aim of the research was to examine the current status of e-government, focusing at the local level. The research itself was carried out with the support of the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC), South Yorkshire, UK and included a survey (questionnaires and interviews) of local authority members of NABit (Northern Authorities Benchmarking IT).

15 questionnaires were sent out to NABit members to ascertain thoughts and views on various aspects of e-government, both of the authority's own progress as well as personal thoughts. The results were analysed along with interviews conducted with members of RMBC to provide a more valid representation of local authorities' attempts to reach the 2005 target. Throughout the research a conceptual model has been used and referred to. The findings from the interviews and work experience at RMBC in particular challenge and update this model. The findings, along with the discussion and conclusion challenge the results of the literature review and show that out of all respondents, confidence in achieving targets is not as high as the government is projecting. Although progress is being made towards full ESD as a significant aspect of e-government, it is a slow progression.

The first objective was to examine the literature to discover information on and gauge reactions to the concept of e-government. In support of the research, literature regarding proposed e-government targets and ideal status was scrutinized. This revealed that the government has generally commissioned the reports that have been written, indicating a lack of independent research. Possibly one of the reasons for the lack of literature is because this area is constantly changing and evolving and any piece of work will quickly become out-dated. Perhaps after the 2005 target, more academic literature will emerge.

The second objective of the study was to examine RMBC and other local authorities' approaches to e-government, their future targets and perceived reasons for successes and failures. The research instruments used were successful in that they challenged the issues raised in the literature and indicated that not all authorities were achieving as much as others, those that the government highlights as being "beacon councils". The research investigated the results and outcomes of the latest projects and ideas for the progression towards the UK government's 2005 target.

The response rate received for this research was very good, although due to the relatively small sample size, it can only provide an indication of progress of e-government and since this was a small-scale piece of research, inferences, rather than conclusive deductions, have been drawn from this study.

The Research Findings

The survey discovered that direct online access to members of the authorities is one of the largest growth areas, suggesting that authorities are taking the need for citizens to have a different channel to voice their opinions seriously. The authorities that responded to the questionnaires felt that Internet penetration in public areas was increasing, which suggested that public access was increasing, as well as more focus on the skills necessary to use the Internet. Whether this is being achieved across the country would require a much more involved project, but the results obtained, along with the literature would suggest that the problem of social inclusion is to some extent being addressed. This recognition at least shows that the

government is maintaining its awareness of the problem, but it also shows that the attempts to decrease this divide is not working as well as was hoped. However, the rapidly developing nature of the Internet means that it is very difficult for all involved to keep up to date with the latest developments.

The information about Pathfinder projects from both the literature and survey suggests that the government already had a view of an ideal pathfinder. The results from the questionnaire suggest that the bidding process had not been perceived as successful in terms of feedback received, either for bids that had been accepted or for those that had not. The questionnaires revealed that a number of participating authorities believed their bids failed due to larger and higher-status authorities receiving more money. The interviews conducted as part of the research also revealed a similar attitude, although the reason for these strong feelings from authorities could be due to resentment from a failed bid.

The research examined targets for local authorities and discovered that the government is very keen on promoting these projects but is frequently failing to provide the support needed at the local level. One of the most significant problems revealed by this research, is that the lack of funding to local authorities is hampering their chances of success. South Yorkshire is a region that has suffered a great deal with its declining basic industries over the past 20 years and even though the Objective 1 Funding has been granted into the region, funding still requires bidding, taking up time and resources which could be better spent.

The questionnaire has indicated that there is sufficient direction from the government about all of the changes that are due to take place, but the problem occurs when the local authorities actually receive the information. The evidence from the literature would suggest that the problem could be that disseminating the information around the authority is hampered by the very nature of local government. If this is the case, there needs to be a huge drive by the authorities to change their culture and make change happen. The findings suggest that involving citizens in the consultation process may be adapted and implemented at the local level, although it is not possible to say when.

The assistance of RMBC in this research has been invaluable. This enabled an in-depth examination of one authority's approach to e-government, which helped to validate the reliability of data collected from other NaBIT members. One of the most useful things about working within the council authority was gaining an awareness regarding the nature of local government and the frustrations that occur. Although this type of action-research approach could be said to cause problems of bias, working within this organisation enabled a greater insight into e-government at a local level than a simple literature review could do.

Conclusions

Worryingly, towards the end of the research period, the Guardian published an article on the 16th of August 2001, stating that the ESD targets were failing to be met. This article discusses the announcement by Andrew Smith, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, that the target of having 90% of routine goods and services online had been missed and was apparently less than half than expected. If this is true, what other failures can be expected along the way? Although progress towards the "information society" is increasing in pace, it seems the UK government needs to reassess its targets and closely monitor the real situation. The IEG statements might help, but even it may only be an empty gesture, since local authorities might prefer to be involved in more short-term projects and plans. The Guardian's article hints that the government is backtracking on its targets, downplaying their previous significance and that there is a real need to broaden significant participation. Perhaps this is the time for more literature on the field of e-government to emerge. It is now imperative that more clarity on e-government issues is provided and government bodies demonstrate a more responsible attitude.

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